

SAILING THE WATER'S EDGE: THE DOMESTIC POLITICS OF AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY. By Helen V. Milner and Dustin Tingley. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015. xv + 352 pp.

Charles R. Hankla  
Georgia State University

Times of uncertainty in US foreign relations seem to produce shelves of new books prescribing a “grand strategy” for the nation. This moment is no exception. The numerous challenges facing the country, from the rise of China to the barbarism of ISIS to a newly assertive Russia, have inspired many experts to suggest in print that American foreign policy is in need of a course correction.

The upcoming presidential election has no doubt contributed to this mood, as candidates and their advisors spar over the best direction for future American engagement with the world. Should the nation adopt a more “realist” posture, eschewing any international actions not in direct support of America’s material interests? Should it withdraw from the Middle East and “pivot” to Asia? Should the United States rely more on diplomatic tools in its foreign policy, recalibrating the relative power of the state and defense departments? Should foreign aid programs be eliminated as worthless or even perverse, or does expanding American generosity hold the key to the future stability of developing nations? Should “high” politics take a back seat to emerging transnational problems such as climate change and terrorism? Is it finally time to abandon America’s postwar internationalist consensus?

The new book by Helen Milner and Dustin Tingley, two highly regarded scholars at Princeton and Harvard respectively, provides some much needed clear thinking during this time of flux. Unlike most recent publications on the subject, *Sailing the Water’s Edge: The Domestic Politics of American Foreign Policy* advocates for no new grand strategy to solve all of America’s challenges abroad. Instead, it is a cautionary tale about how America’s unique political institutions limit the foreign policy choices available to the president.

Rather than taking a conventional approach by tracing foreign policy doctrines across time or reviewing the international challenges of today, Milner and Tingley analyze the various policy instruments available to the United States. When will US policy-makers choose military intervention to achieve their goals, and when will they make use of other tools such as aid, sanctions, trade, or immigration? Milner and Tingley argue that presidents will have the maximum freedom of maneuver over instruments, like military intervention, associated with few distributive effects and low levels of ideological conflict. By contrast, presidential influence will be limited over areas of policy with strong distributive implications, like trade policy or foreign aid, or those where political actors are strongly polarized, like immigration policy. This differential level of presidential influence is, of course, a function of Congressional influence. Congress, Milner and Tingley argue, will be most involved (and by consequence, best informed) about policies that are materially or ideologically salient.

The authors trace this straightforward hypothesis through a series of very impressive empirical tests, all of which come at their question from different angles. Indeed, Milner and Tingley’s

book is likely to become a model for mixed-method empirical research both within international relations and beyond.

For their first empirical test, the authors exploit an enormous dataset on lobbying activities to show that interest groups are more likely to lobby Congress on issues with distributional and ideological resonance, such as foreign aid and immigration. This finding supports one of the key foundations of Milner and Tingley's argument, as it shows why Congress might be more interested in some policy instruments than in others.

Next, Milner and Tingley use another large dataset—this time of Congressional votes—to show that presidents are able to secure their foreign policy goals from the legislature more readily in less distributive areas such as military intervention. And, in perhaps the most original part of their empirical study, the authors examine the structure of bureaucratic institutions to show that those having responsibility over more distributive and ideological policy areas are generally under tighter Congressional oversight.

Next, the authors examine polling data to show that the public is more ideologically divided over the use of some foreign policy instruments than others. Finally, Milner and Tingley turn to a well-structured and convincing case study of US foreign policy in Africa since the 1990s. Among other things, they use this close analysis to link increasing Congressional opposition to foreign aid with a more militarized approach to the continent.

Milner and Tingley's book is full of contributions, many of which go well beyond the core argument. Among the themes that they highlight is that the dynamics of inter-branch politics can help explain the recent militarization of US foreign policy. Military intervention and aid (as distinct from domestic military spending) have few distributive implications, and not many members of Congress are willing to challenge the president's authority over military policy. For that reason, presidents will generally find it easier to make use of military policy instruments to achieve their goals. By contrast, greater Congressional involvement in other policy areas, whether trade, immigration, economic aid, or sanctions, renders these less aggressive approaches more difficult to implement.

Perhaps the authors' most significant contribution is to approach the domestic politics of foreign policy from so many different angles at once. They divide US policy options into a series of discrete instruments, and then look at how the choice among these instruments is impacted by a slew of domestic actors, not just the president and Congress, but also interest groups, the bureaucracy, and the public. This approach allows Milner and Tingley to establish the microfoundations of their argument while also contributing to nearly every major literature on the domestic determinants of foreign policy.

Of course, even the best books have weaknesses, and it is to the authors' credit that they acknowledge and discuss most of them in their conclusion.

First, I couldn't help thinking that a cross-national study would have provided more leverage on the issues that Milner and Tingley address. The United States is in many ways a double outlier when it comes to foreign policy. First, its international position means that the US, to use the

terms developed by neorealists, is much less constrained by the structure of the international system than any other power. As a result, its foreign policy can, to some extent, be considered separately from other actors in the international system. The same is not true for other countries.

And, second, the United States has unique domestic institutions, foremost among them what is perhaps the world's most powerful legislature. As a result, the president of the United States is likely to be more constrained by lawmakers than the chief executives of other countries. Together, this means that the primary constraints on US action are likely to be domestic and not international, the exact inverse of the case in most countries. This reality does not reduce the impact of the theory for the American case, but may mean that it is less generalizable abroad. In any case, constraints on the foreign policy of other powers may come more from partisan or economic actors than from the legislature.

I also found myself wondering whether the war weariness facing the United States might politicize military intervention more than it has in the past, particularly the choice to place "boots on the ground." Congress may find itself intervening more than ever in these choices, especially when government is divided. We are seeing elements of this dynamic, I think, in current debates over what to do about ISIS.

In any event, the increasing militarization of foreign policy can't be driven only by more Congressional involvement in some policy tools than in others. These institutional factors matter, and Milner and Tingley clearly show why. But the important *changes* that we have seen recently may have more to do with shifts in the international system and the ideology of government actors. Milner and Tingley address the conditions under which Congress may be more willing to grant the president authority over more contested policy tools, but this topic strikes me as needing a fuller treatment, perhaps in a future study. I also wonder whether old fashioned bureaucratic politics might be just as important in explaining the militarization of US foreign policy. After all, the institutional heft of the defense department is much greater than that of its rival in Foggy Bottom.

In the final analysis, Milner and Tingley say, the militarization of foreign policy, driven by the political institutions they identify, may undermine the liberal internationalist consensus that has been in place since the end of the Second World War. This could occur if the vicissitudes of Congress prevent the executive from maintaining the kind of long-term policy consistency that was necessary during the cold war, and may again be necessarily in the modern era. Moreover, domestic politics may also push the president towards choosing suboptimal policy instruments, weakening the effectiveness of the United States abroad.

While it is certain that the postwar internationalist consensus is alive and well, some may wonder whether the "liberal" adjective was permanently cast aside by the George W. Bush administration. That question aside, it is these implications of Milner and Tingley's argument that will remain uppermost in my mind. They show very powerfully that the militarization of US foreign policy, as well as the choice of policy instrument, can be driven as much by the whims of domestic politics as by the exigencies of the international system. In a time when pundits seem to imply that ideology and character trump all, their book serves as an important reminder that institutions matter at least as much. If the United States is to find a way to succeed abroad, our

leaders will need to consider how to construct the best foreign policy possible within the democratic but unwieldy institutions that we possess. Milner and Tingley's book is an important first step in helping them succeed.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.